

# The Hammered Dulcimer in America

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To most Americans the hammered dulcimer is a new and unfamiliar musical instrument. Even people who know quite a bit about American folk music often confuse the hammered dulcimer with the three- or four-stringed “Appalachian” or “mountain” dulcimer, an entirely different instrument. Yet, surprisingly, this ancient ancestor of the modern piano was once popular throughout this country.

The hammered dulcimer probably originated at least a thousand years ago in the Near East. From there dulcimers spread throughout North Africa, Europe and Asia. Contact with the Moors in Spain led to introduction of the instrument to Western Europe in the 11th Century, although there is some evidence of its possible use in Ireland several centuries earlier. It flourished under a variety of names; in France it was called the *tympanon*, in Germany the *hackbrett*, and in Hungary the *cimbalon*. During the Renaissance, the hammered dulcimer was popular with all manner of people and was played both in courts and village squares. In the 17th century scholars preparing the English edition of the Bible mistranslated the Greek word for bagpipe as “dulcimer,” giving rise to the oft-quoted mistake that the dulcimer is as old as the Bible. The dulcimer also spread to China and Korea in the 18th century, where it is still known as the *yang chin* or the “foreigner’s zither.”

It is not known when the first hammered dulcimer came to America. The earliest documented reference was made by Judge Samuel Sewall who wrote of hearing one in Salem, Mass., in 1717, but the instruments were probably popular in America long before that.

Hammered dulcimers are particularly interesting because, unlike pianos and organs, most of them were built at home or in small “shops” throughout the country. Thus they tend to reflect regional and personal folk styles. Several of the instruments used in this Festival were built over a century ago by the player’s father, grandfather, or great-grandfather. A careful look will reveal that the instruments used by performers from West Virginia are different from those used by players from New York and Michigan.

During the 19th century, small dulcimer “shops”—



Joseph Edward Matheny, winner of the county-wide dulcimer contest at the 1895 Ritchie County, W. Va., fair. (Photo courtesy of H. E. Matteny)

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factories usually employing fewer than a dozen men—operated in several parts of the country. About the time of the Civil War, dulcimer shops existed in Norwich, Conn.; Sherman, Irving, and Brooklyn, N.Y.; and Chicago. Later in the century, Americans could buy dulcimers from large mail-order houses such as Sears & Roebuck and Montgomery Ward.

Why the hammered dulcimer all but disappeared during the first half of the 20th century remains somewhat of a mystery. Possibly competition from the more fashionable piano and lack of enthusiasm in public-school music programs diminished Americans' attention to this traditional instrument. Several attempts at reviving interest were made early in the 20th century, especially by Henry Ford in Dearborn, Mich., who hired a hammered-dulcimer player to perform with the Early American Dance Orchestra. But such efforts were of no avail.

Participants in this year's Festival of American Folklife have been drawn from several regions of the United States to demonstrate the different playing styles of the past 300 years,

*Anglo-American hammered-dulcimer traditions from several regions of the United States are demonstrated in the Hall of Musical Instruments of the National Museum of History and Technology during the Festival. Exhibits, lecture-demonstrations, and concerts are part of this presentation.*  
(Photo by Jim Pickerell)

styles developed in West Virginia, Michigan, and New York. Similarities and differences among these styles are compared in a series of workshops and performances. All of the performers come from the Anglo-American tradition. (Slightly varied types of hammered dulcimers also form an important part of German-, Hungarian-, Arabic-, Turkish-, and Chinese-American musical-instrument traditions.)

At times during the last four decades it looked as if the hammered-dulcimer tradition in America might die out. Now, because of renewed interest, it appears that this ancient instrument will continue to be heard.

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